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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [ECPS](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: President backs military on Jaffna security zones; GSL defends role in import of equipment for LTTE

Refs: Colombo 2353, and previous

(U) Classified by Long Lee, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: President Kumaratunga has come out strongly in favor of the Sri Lankan military's position on the need to maintain "high security zones" in Jaffna. For its part, the LTTE has announced that it wants to discuss the security zone issue at the next round of political-level talks. In the meantime, the GSL has issued a long document defending its role in the recent import of radio equipment for the LTTE. At this point, despite real friction over the security zones, it is positive that the GSL and the LTTE have so far indicated a willingness to discuss the issue further. END SUMMARY.

Kumaratunga Enters the Fray

2. (C) President Kumaratunga has come out strongly in favor of the Sri Lankan military's position on the "high security zones" in Jaffna. (Note: In a proposal rejected by the LTTE late last week, the military advocated that the zones only be opened to resettlement if the LTTE agrees to strict conditions, including disarming of any LTTE cadre entering them -- See Reftels. Mission is faxing SA/INS a map of the zones.) Kumaratunga's involvement in the issue began late December 27 when her office issued a press release expressing concern about the LTTE's position and announcing that she was cutting short her vacation in order to return to Colombo to deal with the situation. In dramatic tones, the statement ended by saying, "The President's Office will keep the public further informed as events unfold." On December 28, Kumaratunga met Army Commander Lt. General Balagalle and Major General Fonseka, the Jaffna Army commander, to review the matter. According to leaks of what happened at the meeting, Kumaratunga told the two that she was strongly in support of the military's position that the security zones were critical to the defense of Jaffna and should not be dramatically reduced in size.

3. (C) Queried about Kumaratunga's intervention, Jehan Perera, the head of a local think-tank, told us that she seemed to be "angling for cohabitation advantage." Kumaratunga, he said, was clearly trying to create "a crisis atmosphere" by warning the government that it should not undermine the military's position by going too far to accommodate the LTTE. By publicizing her position, Perera remarked that Kumaratunga had probably "scored some political points" on the government. He thought that any damage to the GSL was limited, however, as most people realized that the issue of the security zones needed to be discussed with the LTTE. It was not enough simply to try to turn off debate, which was what Kumaratunga seemed to be trying to do.

LTTE Backs Further Discussion

4. (C) After issuing its strongly worded rejection of the military's proposal on the security zones (see Reftel), the LTTE seems to be taking a more moderate tack at this time. In comments posted on the pro-LTTE website "TamilNet" on December 29, LTTE senior negotiator Anton Balasingham aimed some fire at the Sri Lankan military, which he said was taking a "hard-line attitude" on the security zone matter. By taking its stand, Balasingham asserted, the military was preventing the resettlement of Tamil civilians in Jaffna. That said, Balasingham went on to stress that the LTTE was still strongly in support of the peace process and looked forward to discussing the security zone issue at the January 6-9 round of talks in Thailand. Queried about a proposal put forward by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), Balasingham said he did not know whether a meeting of the Sub-Committee on De-Escalation and Normalization focused on discussing the security zone

issue would "materialize." He indicated that the LTTE believed the sub-committee was "defunct," as it had failed to make progress in solving the issue. The group now preferred to discuss the matter at the political-level talks.

GSL Defends Import of Radio Equipment

15. (SBU) Turning to another contentious issue, the government has issued a long document explaining its decision to allow the import of equipment upgrading the LTTE's radio capabilities (See Reftels). The document, which received significant media coverage, stated that the GSL allowed the import of the equipment only after the LTTE agreed to apply for a license and to broadcast subject to Sri Lankan government regulations. The document went on to note that: "The public will appreciate that the willingness of the LTTE to submit itself to the authority of the government is a 180 degree change from that which prevailed earlier when the LTTE ran an illegal and unauthorized radio operation." Responding to allegations that the Norwegian Embassy should not have been involved in the import of the equipment (it was consignee), the document made clear that it was the GSL that asked the GoN to get involved in the matter. The document added that the Norwegians only became involved when they became convinced that helping facilitate the import of the equipment was in the best interests of the peace process.

16. (C) The government's document seems to have gone some way in explaining to the public the circumstances surrounding the import of the equipment. Jehan Perera said he thought that the controversy over the issue would now die down to a large extent. Perera added that the government had handled the issue "clumsily" by not taking the issue public earlier. By its failure to get its side of the story out earlier, the government had also hurt the Norwegian facilitators, who had been made to seem almost pro-LTTE by some elements in the press. In a sign that the issue may not be going away soon, Harim Peiris, a spokesman for President Kumaratunga, told us that the government's explanation of its involvement was "too little and too late." Peiris added that Kumaratunga wanted a "full accounting" and might write to the Norwegian PM requesting an explanation of the GoN role in the matter.

COMMENT

17. (C) As it tries to manage the blowups over the radio equipment and Jaffna security zones, the GSL seems a bit on the defensive. With Kumaratunga and others hitting out hard against the LTTE, the government is finding its room for maneuver narrowing to some extent. At this point, however, it is positive that the GSL and the LTTE have so far indicated a willingness to discuss the security zone issue further, despite real friction over how to resolve it. Still acting in almost a binary manner as far as the peace process is concerned, neither side seems to want things to come to a crisis point where they cannot negotiate a way out. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS